

Mysticism: A Means of Unity and Peaceful Co-existence within Islam

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Abstract

Muslims are quite often accused of being divided into many factions, such as the *Shia*, *Sunni*, and *Salfisects*, as well as the *Imamah/ Zaidiayah* and *Bravelvi/ Deobandiones*. They differ in practice and belief, and they have particularly disparate views concerning the legitimacy of mysticism, which is usually articulated as Sufism or *Irfan*. These apparent disagreements are often considered as real and block the possibility of any unity in the Islamic religious tradition. This perspective not only exists in the Western world but also in the Islamic world.

The very word 'Islam' comes from the Arabic root 'سلم', a word that means 'peace.' This expression provides a room to interpret Islam as a religious tradition that cultivates peace. One method of showing this is by discussing the form and substance that is found in Islam. The prescribed practices like *prayer*, *wudu*, etc., are the forms of Islam. These forms presume the substance which is mysticism/sufism/*irfan*. The substance is expressed through different forms. The forms are exoteric (the *zahir*) expressions that are conditioned by the substance, which is esoteric (the *batin*). The substance of Islam may be expressed in different forms but not vice versa.

This paper seeks to argue that mysticism/sufism/*irfan*, the substance of Islam, is a means to unify all exoteric forms of Islam. This is possible because the substance is shared and a prerequisite to any form of Islam. Mysticism provides an opportunity for Muslims to find among themselves a point of unity which will reduce the apparent differences that exist, or at the very least view these differences in such a way that they are interpreted as being esoterically coherent and unified, though exoterically plural.

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Introduction

This paper seeks to define Islam in a way that discerns the possibility to bring unity and integration within Islamic tradition. It will try to explore the conceptual framework under which all the exoteric expressions of the different forms of Islamlike different factions: Sunni, Hanafi, Shia, Imamiyah, Salfietmay be defined in identical fashion. It will be argued that this hermeneutical possibility lies in *Irfan* or Sufism. Moreover, this will not question the historical unfolding of Islam either.

For this purpose, it will discuss the necessity of the conception of communion with ultimate reality in all religions at least in reveled religions like Christianity, Islam. Then it will search out the conception of Sufism in Islam contrasting it with Jurisprudence. It will also seek to explore the fact that Sufism constitutes the substance of Islam rather than Jurisprudence. In the final phase, it will argue out that Sufism may be taken as a means to unify all the exoteric expressions in Islam.

Religions and the conception of Communion

Religion is a unique conception. Its uniqueness lies in its built in conception of communion with the reality. Religion without this conception/quest for being one with ultimate reality would have nothing to distinguish it from merely human construction. It would be an ideology, or a political agenda or an illusion otherwise.

The very foundation of religion lies in the quest for becoming one with ultimate reality. Unless one denies that there is no such thing as "ultimate reality" as is the case with pluralists. Pluralism implies that "religious belief systems are reduced to the same level as one's choice of breakfast cereal. One's own beliefs may be tasty and nourishing, but they are a matter of personal taste and experience" (Brown 2004, p227). In addition to this, the pluralists may not be interested in the truthness of any religion but the role religions play in the state. Thus,

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in pluralistic world, religions may be reduced to a political tool. Many religions recognize the idea of the direct communion with ultimate reality (Chittick 2003, p1). Otherwise there is no deriving force in the religions if this idea does not exist at all.

Islam also recognizes the quest for communion with God. This is conceivable in the realm of Sufism or mysticism. Chittick prefers the term "Sufism" instead of "Mysticism". He explains that the term "Mysticism" carries strong negative connotations. He argues "I prefer instead the word "Sufism" which has the advantage of deriving from Arabic and pertaining specifically to Islam" (Chittick 2003, p1). The quest for communion was the motivating force for all prophets (peace be upon them). Prophet Moses, for example, mentions his wish which is reported in the holy Quran as "O my Lord! Show me (Yourself), that I may look upon You" (The holy Quran 7:143). Many traditions of holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) also display the possible communion or *ru'aya*¹ of Allah. As holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) says, "You will see your lord as you see the full moon while you will not disagree amongst yourself". All these signify the fact that the conception of communion exists in the realm of Sufism which is recognized by Islam.

Sufism and Jurisprudence

Ahmad Zarruq who is a classical Sufi scholar has defined Sufism as "a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God" (Zarruq 2008). Darqawi defines sufism with reference to Ahmad ibn Ajiba, "a science through which one can know how to travel into the presence of the Divine, purify one's inner self from filth, and beautify it with a variety of praiseworthy traits" (Darqawi 200).

It is commonly held among the Sufis that the lexical root of the term Sufism has either come from *safā* (صَفَا), which in Arabic means

¹ *Ru'aya* is a root word from "raa" "yara" in Arabic which means to see. This term is very common in Islamic tradition generally and specifically Sufi tradition.

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"purity" or from *ṣūf* (صُوف), which in Arabic means "wool". The wool is referring to the cloaks that the early Sufis wore. Karen Armstrong writes "the name 'Sufi' was given to those people who wore a coarse woollen garment that was standard among the poor" (Armstrong 2001). In Nestorian Christianity "wool was associated with asceticism and deliberate poverty" (Brown 2004, p169). Baldick argues that "the connection with the wool clothing of Christian monks therefore seems the most probable origin of the term" (Baldick 1989, p15-24). Al-Rudhabari, the Sufi, writes, "The Sufi is the one who wears wool on top of purity" (Kabbani, 2004, p83).

Still other Sufis suggest that the word Sufism comes from the term *mahl us suffah* ("the people of the bench"), who held regular gatherings of *dhikr*. For Al Qushayri, *dhikr* is the pillar of Sufism which is quite plausible as holy Quran instructs believers to "remember God often" (Quran 33:40). At another place, Allah almighty urges "***And keep yourself content with those who call on their lord morning and evening seeking his face*** (Al Quran 18:28). It further describes that "the remembrance of God makes the heart clam" (Quran 13: 28). For Sufis, "obedience to this Quranic mandate became highly structured and disciplined, requiring the initiation and guidance of a sheikh" (Brown 2004, p159). Al Hujwairi writes on account of *dhikr* "Sahl [al Tasari] said to one of his disciple : strive to say continuously for one day" O Allah! O Allah!" and do the same the next day and the day after that –until he became habituated to saying those words. Then he bade him to repeat them at night also until they became so familiar that he uttered them even during his sleep. Then he said "Do not repeat them any more, but let all your faculties be engrossed in remembering God!" The disciple did this, until he became absorbed in the thought of God. One day, when he was in his house, a piece of wood fell on his head and broke it. The drops of blood which trickled to the ground bore the legend, "Allah! Allah! Allah!" (Nicholson 1959, p195). Hakim Mohammad Said writes with reference to the medieval Iranian scholar AbūRayḥān al-Bīrūnī,

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“the word *sūfi* is derived from the Greek word *sofia* (σοφία), meaning wisdom” (Said 2010, and Burckhardt 1976, p3).

Allah almighty mentions the centrality of piety and purification on a number of places in holy Quran. The purification is simply a preparation for communion with Allah almighty. Like Allah Almighty says, “Indeed he succeeds who purifies his own self. And Indeed he fails who corrupts his own self” (Al Quran 92:2). Allah almighty has gone to the extent where He associates the responsibility of purification with holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and appreciates it “He is the one who raised from among the people of Mecca a messenger from among themselves. Who recites to them his verses and purifies them, and teaches them the book and wisdom, although they were before certainly in clear error” (Al Quran 62: 2).

*Holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in a famous Hadith Jibril refers to Sufism as Ihsan (Sahih Muslim). He defines Ihsanas “To worship Allah as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, yet He sees you.” Furthermore, In Sufi tradition, the use of the heart as a vehicle for the acquisition of knowledge is very common. Many Sufis display this ability in their day to day activities. This ability of grasping the substances of things or unpacking the hidden reality is conceivable in the realm of Sufism. Holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) referred to it when he warned: “Fear the *firasah*² of the believer, for surely he sees with the light of Allah.” After holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and companions, this responsibility has been taken and effectively fulfilled by the Sufis in Islamic history.*

Some earlier Orientalists argued that mysticism was “alien to a harsh and sterile religion of the desert – that is, Islam” (Chittick 2003). The *Salafis* claiming to be ‘reformists’ or ‘revivalists’ view “its (Sufi) practices as innovation (*bida*), idolatrous (*shirk*) and to be the ‘cause

²*Firasat* is an Arabic word refers to intuitive capacity for penetrating the substance of things.

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of Islam's decline' from the 18th century" (Geaves 2005). William Chittick replies that it is like embracing the Orientalist myth of a harsh and sterile Islam and ignoring the intellectual and spiritual heritage of Islam. This response had been further added by Khalid M. Abou El Fadl (2001) that this group focused all efforts on excluding people from tradition and establishing authoritarian regimes (Chittick 2003). The validity of Sufism was recognized as a part of Islam by the Amman Message in 2005, adopted by the political leadership of the world in O.I.C in December 2005. The International Islamic *Fiqh* Academy of Jeddah along with six other international Islamic scholarly assemblies also validated the legitimate status of Sufism in July 2006.

The fundamental question with which Gnostics engage is "How can one become a good Muslim?" Good is not a concept defined in a vacuum but is defined in the context of Islamic metaphysics. Good Muslim is the one who follows in each and every activity the example of holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) which is the best among all. The holy Quran reports as "Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow for him who hopes in (the Meeting with) Allah and the Last Day and remembers Allah much". (Al Quran 33: 21). Similarly Islam also focuses on the traits and virtues of other prophets "*Anbiya*" and friends of God "*Aoliya*³". Hence Muslim society focuses on the creation of Good Muslims which eventually turns out to be helping reduce any possible rift among different components of Muslim society.

William Chittick argues that Islam "addresses three primary domains of human concern. These can be called body, mind and spirit; or doing, knowing, and being" (Chittick 2003). Body is concerned with the realm of practices, rituals, social relationships whereas the mind is the realm of understanding, perceiving. The spirit is the realm of being one with real being and is the deepest awareness of the being.

³ *Anbiyaa* is a plural of *nabiin* Arabic which means prophet. *Aoliyaa* is a plural of *wali* which means Sufi.

Concerns of body are adequately addressed in *fiqh* which elaborates the different commandments on *salah*, *saom*, *zakat*, *nikah*, *talaq* etc. The understanding of these commandments or the rational of these *ahkam*⁴ may be elucidated in *fiqh*. This may be termed as the form of Islam. There are differences among different sects in the forms of Islam. For example, there are five prayers obligatory on every Muslim. Each denomination accepts it without any change in its referent. Five prayers are a must on each Muslim. However, each would differ in its observation like tying hands below waist (hanafi), on the chest (shafie) or not at all (hanbali). Similarly, Sunni funeral prayer is *bis sir* whereas the *Salfis biljahr*⁵. Sunni tradition does not allow the combing the two prayers like *Dhuhr* and *Asr* whereas it is compulsory in *Shia* tradition. It may also be argued that these sects emerge from the belief of the superiority of one form over another. Different interpretations lead to different formal practices.

Sufism is the Substance in Islam

The spirit is the realm in which communion with God is conceivable. This is the purpose of being. The forms are merely means of expression of worship for Muslims. However, the telos of each form is to seek the pleasure of the ultimate reality that is nothing but God. Each Muslim whether Sunni or Shia or Sulfi/ hanafi or shafie/ imamiyah or zaidiyah when worships seeks the ample pleasure of Allah. The apparent form may differ but the aim is the same which is the pleasure of Allah. In addition to this, each Muslim shares the same ontological and cosmological view. For all of them, it is the God who has brought this world into existence out of nothing. It is the God who has sent prophets including holy prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) for the guidance of humankind in

⁴ *Ahkam* is a root word from verb "ahkamaa" yuhkimo" which means "to give order". Ahkam means the different commandments given by Allah almighty.

⁵ *Bis Sir* is an Arabic word means "silence" whereas "*biljahr*" means "loud". "*BiSir*" is referring to the prayers in which Imam is supposed to recite the holy Quran silently like in "*Dhuhr*" according to Sunni tradition whereas "*jahr*" is referring to the prayers in which Imam is supposed to recite the holy Quran in a way that he is audible to his followers like in *fajr* according to Sunni tradition.

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every quarter of life. Hence communion with Allah or seeking divine pleasure is the substance in Islam.

An early Egyptian Sufi *Dhun I Nun* is reported to say “fear of hell fire, in comparison with the fear of being parted from the beloved, is like a drop of water cast into the mightiest ocean” (Schimmel 1975, p 131). According to Qushayri, “he (the Sufi) does not incline his heart to any thought that would incite him to other-than-God.....when he is sure in every glance of Him of his return to Him, and when God inspires him by making him aware of His secrets concerning his destiny” (Qushayri 1990, p 317).

W. Chittick explains the position of Sufism and Sufis this way: “Muslim scholars who focused their energies on understanding the normative guidelines for the body came to be known as jurists, and those who held that the most important task was to train the mind in achieving correct understanding came to be divided into three main schools of thought: theology, philosophy, and Sufism. This leaves us with the third domain of human existence, the spirit. Most Muslims who devoted their major efforts to developing the spiritual dimensions of the human person came to be known as Sufis” (Chittick 2003, p1).

Islam urges from the very beginning its interlocutors to bring “the body, the soul, and the spirit into conformity with the divine purpose in creating the world” (Chittick 2003). Each component is not an identity in itself but for Islam. Abu Hamid al Ghazzali “worked tirelessly to reconcile the practice of the both inner and outer aspects of the religion” (Ahmed 2002). Iqbal writes “the function of Sufism in Islam has been to systematize mystic experience; though it must be admitted, that Ibn-i-Khaldun was the only Muslim who approached it in a thoroughly scientific spirit” (Iqbal 1999, p144). Therefore each should be considered as a part in the entire tradition of Islam. This tells us that there is a complete internal harmony among all heads like *fiqh*, *kalam* and *tasawuf*. Formally they appear to be different realms. However, all components share the same telos.

William Chittick argues that Sufis saw prophet’s career “marked by two grand events: the descent of the Quran, and ascent of Muhammad

to God” (Chittick 2003, p1). Muhammad as a prophet began his career when God revealed holy Quran upon him and reached to the climax of his carrier when he met God in a journey known as “Al Mi-raj” (the ladder). When prophet came down, God gave him a gift “*As salah*” the daily prayers. Companions asked if they could travel to God, Prophet answered that through daily prayers man can travel to God because “the daily prayer is the ladder of the believer”.

William Chittick further argues “Just as the descent of the Koran from God demonstrates to Muslims the divine origin of the book and the truth of the message, so also Muhammad's ascent to God verifies the goal of the message and shows the fruit of putting its guidelines into practice. The Quran descended so that people can ascend. By submitting to the Quranic message and following Muhammad, people can achieve their proper status in creation, which is to be simultaneously God's servants and his vicegerents” (Chittick 2003, p1). True meaning of being can be achieved through communion with Allah. Man can recognize its finitude when it comes across the infinite. Therefore each Muslim should fashion his life so that he can achieve it as early and as comprehensively as possible.

Conclusion

If we interpret that *Sufism* is the substance in Islam and many practices in different sects are termed as the form in Islam, it will provide an opportunity to interpret different sects as merely formal. Sufism, the substance of Islam, is a means to unify all exoteric forms of Islam. This is possible because the substance is shared and a prerequisite to any form of Islam. Sufism provides an opportunity for Muslims to find among themselves a point of unity which will reduce the apparent differences that exist, or at the very least view these differences in such a way that they are interpreted as being esoterically coherent and unified, though exoterically plural. Substantially Islam is a complete submission to the will and the pleasure of Allah almighty.

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